John Miovich in Watsonville, California

The Pajaro Valley of California is an area of rich soil and a mild, temperate climate, just right for growing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Watsonville is its largest town.

After a railroad was built through the valley in the 1870s, it became a shipping point for agricultural products. This attracted fruit brokers, those who buy and sell fruit. At first they came from San Francisco and San Jose, and they built or leased packing houses in Watsonville but did not live there. Then starting in the late 1880s, as the apple acreage started to increase in the area, many brokers settled in Watsonville. The time from then until the beginning of WWI would become known as the Golden Age of Apples for the region. The greatest of the apple festivals, known as the Apple Annual, flourished from 1910 to 1912, and the Pajaro Valley and Watsonville became known all over the United States as the place where "Apple is King".

Most of the brokers who started settling in Watsonville were Croatians, and most of those Croatians were from the area around Dubrovnik.

John Miovich was one of those fruit brokers. This is his story.

Fig. 1

John Miovich
1866-1935

John Miovich was one of a handful of Croatian men who started the fruit brokerage industry in Watsonville, California, in the late 1800s.

He was born Ivo Mijović on 29 Aug. 1866 in the village of Mihanići, hamlet of Nosanovići, Konavle, Austria (today, Croatia). His father was Pero Mijović, and his mother was Stane Marinović.[1] Another prominent Croatian in Watsonville at the time was Filip Marinovich, John's first cousin, who was born in the neighboring village of Pridvorje and went to the same church as John. His business partner in Watsonville, Luke Cikuth (orig.: Cikut), was born in the same small hamlet, which at the time was comprised of one Cikut family, 3 Mijović families and one Butijer (Butier) family.[2]

John arrived in the U.S. around 1890.[3] He married Ana Zadjelović in San Jose in 1901.[4] Ana was born in Orašac, just northwest of Dubrovnik, in 1882.[5]

Fig. 2

John Miovich and his first wife,
Ana Zadjelović.

He returned to Austria in 1908 because his wife had tuberculosis and wanted to return to her home. He bought property in Dubrovnik near Pile Gate, and lived there until his death in 1935. They had no children. Ana died in 1913 and John then married Marija Curić with whom he had 2 sons.[6]

The first mention of John Miovich in Watsonville is in the 1892 City Directory where he is listed as a packer with M. N. Lettunich.[7] In the mid-1890s, he partnered with Mato Grizich in the firm Miovich & Grizich, which was dissolved in March of 1898.[8]

Below is his only mention in the U.S. census records:

1900 census; living at 213 Main St., Watsonville; head of household, b. Nov. '67 [sic], single; his birthplace and the birthplaces of his father and mother was Austria; immigrated in 1890; renting; occupation: fruit shipper. Others living in the house were: Mitchell Pendo, partner with Miovich; occupation: fruit shipper. Luke Cikuth, partner with Miovich but occupation listed as day laborer. The following were all boarders in the house rented by John Miovich, all were born in Austria, and all were day laborers: John Chinovich, Nick Dupchich, Anton Beilich, Antone Vukich, Anton Kralj, John Kralj, Anton Bilich.[3]

The newspaper article below of 1895 mentions Mr. Miovich only once. It is shown here because of its historical interest — it mentions Marko Rabasa who was the first apple broker in Watsonville (and also a Croatian), the unique method of purchasing fruit "in the blossom," and gives a list of other fruit brokers in Watsonville at the time. It is also the first newspaper article that mentions John Miovich.

Newspaper of 7 March 1895[9]; article: "…It is not many years ago since M. Rabasa came to this valley and bought up apples for the Eastern market. He is yet in the harness and was one of the big shippers to Eastern markets this year. The other firms engaged in the business are: Scurich Bros., M. N. Lettunich & Co. (who are the pioneer Eastern shippers and have made a specialty of developing that market), N. Banaz, F. P. Marinovich, J. L. Ivancovich & Co., M. Rilovich & Bro., Puhiera & Strazicich, Gravosa Fruit Co., P. N. Lettunich, **J. P. Miovich**, M. Gerkovich, A. W. Condit & Co., Prettyman & Wolf, and M. L. Woody. These firms are located here. In addition to these are representatives during each season of leading Eastern commission houses who ship on their own account.

"Fruit shippers have been in the habit of buying orchards during the spring—'in the blossom' as it is called. The immunity from crop failure has protected them to some extent in this daring form of purchase. Such a system of purchasing fruit—figuring on a blossom outlook— is unknown elsewhere, and would break the solidest New York apple buyer if he tried it in the apple districts of his state. Year after year our orchards blossom and the trees bear heavily, and our orchardists do not figure on a crop failure…Comparatively but a small amount of the crop is handled by growers. Nearly all of it is bought in the blossom stage. The picking, handling and packing business is almost entirely in the hands of Austrians

who have been trained in the business and thoroughly know every detail thereof. The inspection they make of fruit for Eastern shipment is as critical as that of champagne by experienced cellarmen during the period of processing."

Then in 1902, John Miovich and M. N. Lettunich were the first Croatians to establish their businesses in the area that would eventually become the central packing house district of Watsonville. As the newspaper of 24 April 1902[10] put it, "…[C]ompleted [was] one of the largest transfers of the year of city property not on Main street. It was an important sale, and will do much to make the district near the local [train] station a fruit packing house section which will be easily reached by railroad spur switches. It is a decisive step in favor of the centralization of shipping interests at Watsonville depot. The property sold [to]…**J. P. Miovich & Co**…and…M. N. Lettunich & Co…" The property was near W. Third and Locust streets. Today W. Third St. is W. Beach St.

The packing houses of Watsonville suffered many fires over the years. In May 1903[11], the packing houses of the Earl Fruit Co. and the Pajaro Valley Fruit Exchange were destroyed by fire. The houses of Miovich and Lettunich, mentioned in the paragraph above and across the street from the main fire were saved and suffered only minor losses.

Mr. Miovich had a good mind for business, as illustrated by this comment in a newspaper of 1 May 1907[12] ("Shook" are the pieces of sawn lumber that fruit boxes are made from.): "…This year the fruit men who contracted for their box shooks last fall are congratulating themselves. To illustrate: **J. P. Miovich & Co**. are receiving this week five carloads of shooks from the box trust which they contracted for last year at the rate of 9½ cents per unmade box; today the quotation for the same is from 15 to 17 cents. So it can readily be seen that the fruit packers who contracted early for shooks have a license to congratulate themselves."

Mr. Miovich was always in the forefront of the apple packing business in Watsonville. Here is part of an article in the newspaper of 25 Nov. 1905[13]: "…The bulk of apples still remaining in the valley is in the hands of M. N. Lettunich & Company, **J. P. Miovich & Company** and F. P. Marinovich, although other packers hold a number of scattering lots. When the last car of Pajaro valley's 1905 apple crop goes forward, the 3000 carload mark will no doubt have been reached…" Note that the 3 owners of the companies listed above were born within 2 years of each other in adjacent villages (Pridvorje and Mihanići) and went to the same church in Pridvorje. Undoubtedly they knew each other as boys.

And this newspaper item from 15 May 1907[14]: "Today J. S. Menasco sold the 1907 apple crop of his orchard, near Corralitos…to **J. P. Miovich & Co**. for $10,000…The orchard consist of about 45 acres of well aged apple trees, mostly Newtowns…"

And this newspaper item from 3 June 1908[15]: "**J. P. Miovich & Co**. one of the leading fruit concerns in this city, has entered into an agreement with J. S. Menasco to purchase the fruit crop from the latter's 60-acre fruit farm near Corralitos for the next four years…" Note that Mr. Miovich returned to Dubrovnik in August of this year. He was certainly a forward-thinking person. Or perhaps he thought he might return.

The growth and prominence of the apple industry in Watsonville led to the creation of the Apple Annual, a festival of several days' length, held in 1910, 1911 and 1912.

Prior to the Apple Annuals there were agricultural fairs in Watsonville that had displays of farm equipment and fruits and vegetables to be judged for quality. But there were almost no Slav participants at these fairs. For example, in a newspaper article of 26 Oct. 1907[16]: "The committees charged with making the awards at the late Pajaro Valley Fair have finished their work and the list is appended. …Horses: Matched span, 6 horses—Lucich & Gordan…Fruits and vegetables: Smith Ciders*—1st, **J. P. Miovich & Co**…" Of hundreds of categories, these were the only Slavs listed; curious, considering that in 3 years' time, at the first Apple Annual, the Slav exhibitors will practically own the place. *[*Smith's Cider is a variety of apple.]*

By this time, John Miovich had been in Watsonville for 18 years and was doing quite well for himself. But his wife was getting progressively ill with tuberculosis and wanted to return to the old country. In July of 1908, Miovich sold his part of the J. P. Miovich Company to his business partner, Luke Cikuth[17], and gave power of attorney to his cousin, Filip Marinovich.[18]

Fig. 3

Filip Marinovich
1864-1938

This newspaper article of 20 Aug. 1908[19] tells of his departure: "**J. P. Miovich**…the senior partner of the firm of **J. P. Miovich & Co**. leaves tomorrow…for his native town, Ragusa [Dubrovnik]… [He] will be accompanied by his wife and mother-in-law, Mrs. K. Zadielovich. Mr. Miovich is one of Pajaro valley's pioneer fruit packers, having [packed fruit] for more than 15 years…In later years Mr. Miovich has

been associated with Louis P. Cikuth, under the firm name of **J. P. Miovich & Co**…[T]heir 'Valley View Brand' has done much toward advertising this locality…Mr. Miovich still retains his extensive property interests here which will be looked after and cared for by F. P. Marinovich." He did not return to Watsonville.

J. P. Miovich & Co. continued under that name for a few years while owned solely by Luke Cikuth. In the newspaper of August 1909[20], the wedding reception of Antone Novacovich and Mary Kalich (orig. Kalačić) was held in the packing house of J. P. Miovich & Co. The company probably lasted until after the fire mentioned below.

In April 1911 yet another packing house fire occurred in Watsonville. This time it was the property built by John Miovich in 1902, and now owned by Luke Cikuth. A newspaper article of 3 April 1911[21] reports the following: "BIG PACKING HOUSE DESTROYED BY FIRE. A disastrous fire, which is believed to have been of an incendiary origin, early this morning destroyed the packing house owned by Louis P. Cikuth at the corner of Locust and West Third streets…The fire was first noticed about 2 o'clock this morning by officer John Whalen while patrolling his beat, and he immediately hastened to the engine house and the alarm was turned in…The firemen responded quickly but the fire had secured too much headway and the inflammable buildings were soon reduced to burning embers.

"The loss is estimated to be $12,000 by Mr. Cikuth and insurance for only $1600 is carried. The packing house…[was] entirely destroyed, 10,000 fruit boxes were destroyed, shook material for about 6000 more boxes were burned and a buggy, several fruit trucks, a spraying outfit and all the fruit wagons on the premises were wiped out. The fire is believed to have originated in the front office and swept towards the rear. An incendiary is thought to have caused the fire for a year ago an attempt was made to burn the packing house, the attempt being frustrated.

"The packing house…[was] formerly owned by the **J. P. Miovich company**, who sold the property to Mr. Cikuth. Coming as it did at this time of the year, the fire will cripple Mr. Cikuth. Mr. Cikuth intends to immediately rebuild and be open by the time the fruit season commences…"

Fig. 4

Luke Cikuth
1873-1970

Luke "Louis" Cikuth rebuilt and continued in the apple packing business in Watsonville until his retirement. He died in 1970 at the age of 96.

John Miovich is mentioned a few more times in the Watsonville newspapers. In the paper of 14 Nov. 1913[22] is the following: "News has been received here of the death of Mrs. J. Mijovich [Miovich], which occurred on Oct. 19th at Dubrovnik, Dalmatia. Mrs. Mijovich was formerly a resident of Watsonville, her husband at one time being in the fruit business here, and the news comes as a great shock to their many friends. Besides her husband Mrs. Mijovich leaves a sister in Watsonville, Mrs. V. Lister."

In the same paper is this obituary: "Dubrovnik, Dalmatia, Oct. 19, 1913, Mrs. J. Mijovich [Miovich], a former resident of Watsonville."[22]

This was the last mention of Miovich in the Watsonville newspapers.

After John's first wife, Ana Zadjelović Miovich, died in 1913, John married Marija Curić in 1915 in Dubrovnik (Pile). Marija was born in Brsečine in 1893. They had two sons, Pero and Ivo.[6]

John Miovich bought 3 properties in the Pile and Boninovo areas of Dubrovnik, became a landlord, and died in Pile in 1935.[6]

Fig. 5

John Miovich and his second wife, Marija Curić.

John Miovich
1866-1935

John Miovich and his first wife,
Ana Zadjelović.

John Miovich was listed in 6 Watsonville City Directories between 1892 and 1906. He had 3 different residential addresses in those years. Note the address over the door in the top photo. The first time his address was listed as 185 W. Third St. was in the 1904 City Directory.

The woman in dark dress is Kate Zlošilo Zadjelovich (*1841) with her two daughters on either side of her. On her left is Vica “Louise” Lister; on her right is Ana Miovich. Woman on far left is unknown.

Inside of 185 W. Third St., Watsonville, home of John Miovich and family. The woman in the middle is Kate Zlošilo Zadjelovich (*1841) with her two daughters. On her left is Ana Miovich; on her right is Vica “Louise” Lister. Note the photo high up on the wall in the top photo. It is the wedding photo of John Miovich and Ana Zadjelovich that can be seen on the first page of this article (Fig. 2).

Footnotes.

1. Stanja duša of Pridvorje church, located in Bishop's archive in Dubrovnik.
2. Niko Kapetanić and Nenad Vekarić. *Stanovništvo Konavala #2* (Dubrovnik: Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 1999), 179, 181.
3. 1900 U.S. census, Watsonville, CA.
4. Microfilm records from San Francisco Diocese archive located in St. Patrick's Seminary, 320 Middlefield Rd., Menlo Park, CA.
5. Information from Dr. Nenad Vekarić. His information comes from church records now located in the Bishop's archive in Old Town, Dubrovnik.
6. As told by granddaughter in Dubrovnik.
7. *San Jose City Directory 1892*, includes Santa Cruz Co., Watsonville starts on p. 813. Published by Husted. Located at Santa Cruz City Library, Genealogy Room.
8. *Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 24 Mar 1898.
9. *Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 7 March 1895.
10. *Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 24 April 1902.
11. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 12 May 1903.
12. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 1 May 1907.
13. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 25 Nov. 1905.
14. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 15 May 1907.
15. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 3 June 1908.
16. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 26 Oct. 1907.
17. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 17 July 1908.
18. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 20 July 1908.
19. *Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 20 Aug. 1908.
20. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 16 Aug. 1909.
21. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 3 April 1911.
22. *Evening Pajaronian* newspaper (Watsonville); 14 Nov. 1913.

Photos.

Fig. 1. John Miovich. Cropped from Fig. 7.
Fig. 2. John Miovich and Ana Zadjelovich. Photo from Mary Scurich Farris of Watsonville. Scanned Oct. 2003.
Fig. 3. Filip Marinovich. Photo from Bill Marinovich of Watsonville, Filip's grandson. Scanned Nov. 2003.
Fig. 4. Luke Cikuth. Cropped from photo of Mary Scurich Farris of Watsonville. Scanned Oct. 2003.
Fig. 5. John Miovich and his second wife, Marija Curić. Photo from Tim Lister of Gilroy, CA. Scanned in July 2010.
Fig. 6. John Miovich. Photo from Tim Lister of Gilroy, CA. Scanned in July 2010.
Fig. 7. John Miovich and Ana Zadjelovich. Photo from Tim Lister of Gilroy, CA. Scanned in July 2010.
Fig. 8. Miovich house. Photo from Tim Lister of Gilroy, CA. Scanned in July 2010.
Fig. 9. Inside of Miovich house. Photo from Tim Lister of Gilroy, CA. Scanned in July 2010.

Note: Tim Lister is the grandnephew of Ana Miovich, and grandson of Vica "Louise" Lister, sister of Ana Miovich.